

# DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES

*How employers can support neurodiverse employees*

BY BROOKE SMITH

## AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES IN THE WORKPLACE

Nearly half (**45%**) of Canadian autistic employees say they have to mask their autistic traits at work, according to an April 2023 survey by OnePoll for autism advocacy organization Auticon.

The survey, which polled more than 950 autistic adults globally, found among all respondents, only **44%** said they could be their authentic selves at work. Only **7%** said they have an autistic role model in the workplace.

When asked about the most challenging aspect of their career, more than a third (**35%**) of all respondents cited settling into a new organization, while **31%** cited the recruitment process.

**B**ased on multiple studies, it's estimated that roughly 15 to 20 per cent of the global population is neurodivergent, an umbrella term that includes autism, dyslexia, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and Tourette's syndrome.

With a significant portion of employees identifying as neurodiverse, organizations that aren't tapping into this talent pool could struggle to remain competitive, says Noorin Mizuyabu, national senior manager for diversity, equity and inclusion and talent attraction at KPMG in Canada.

"It's important we harness the strengths and talents of neurodivergent talent, not only to help build confidence and self-esteem but also to ensure equity-deserving individuals are given an opportunity to thrive."

Since 2021, KPMG in Canada has hired 28 employees via Specialisterne, a recruiting agency that specializes in promoting the talents of neurodiverse individuals. According to an internal sur-

vey, 89 per cent of the firm's neurodivergent employees have been performing as well, or better than, their peers, and 97 per cent reported their employment at KPMG has improved their lives significantly.

## Supporting ahead of hiring

Employers begin supporting neurodivergent individuals even before they set foot in the door, starting with job descriptions, says Gillian Forth, workplace support program manager for North America at Specialisterne.

"We'll sometimes see job postings with vague language or they may include skills that are not core competencies and requirements for a job. That leads to neurodivergent folks to self-select out of applying."

While many job postings ask candidates to contact the organization if they require specific accommodations during an interview, many employers are taking a proactive approach through measures such as sending interview questions in advance, says Farzeen Mawji, national inclusion and diversity practice leader at Gallagher.

For many neurodivergent employees, the traditional interview process is a large barrier to employment as it determines how well an individual fits into a neurotypical social situation, says Matthew Worobec, senior manager in KPMG's private enterprise practice and who also mentors these workers.

While a traditional interview is a test of how well a candidate can sell themselves in an hour, neurodivergent candidates at KPMG participate

in a five-week training program. It seems to be working, as the firm's retention rate of these employees is 89 per cent. "The intention is for 100 per cent transition to permanent work. It's also an opportunity for candidates to determine if it's the right fit for them," says Mizuyabu.

During onboarding, employers are encouraged to facilitate a structured and transparent process, says Forth. That means meeting with new hires prior to their starting date, being clear about first-day, 30-day, and 60-day expectations and explaining how these candidates will develop the required skills for their role. "Although we emphasize creating a structured onboarding plan, being flexible and adaptable with that plan for neurodivergent folks can make all the difference."

### **An inclusive workplace**

Once a neurodivergent employee is hired, employers need to ensure any required supports are in place.

This includes inclusive performance management, which entails clear communication and the removal of vague language, says Forth. "Sometimes people shy away from speaking candidly and sharing information really clearly and openly — especially when it comes to . . . constructive feedback."

Many neurodivergent employees can experience a sensory overload from stimuli, such as lighting, noise and temperature, particularly within a large organization. Solutions can be as simple as providing the employee with noise-cancelling headphones or a private space or cubicle with high walls that prevent distraction.

Remote work is another option, she says. "Many neurodivergent people enjoy working in the office in a hybrid or full-time [arrangement]. But remote work can benefit neurodivergent folks because they can control their sensory environment. They can also have better control over their schedules, [such as] being able to work around appointments."

While software such as text-to-speech or speech-to-text programs can support communication efforts, the written word remains the strongest communication channel, says Forth. "[It's important to] have directions, instructions and expectations in writing — for example, if someone has a briefing or a meeting to review a project."

Frequent check-ins — ideally between 30 to 45 minutes — are another great way to support neurodiverse employees, says Mawji. "At least every two weeks or so is a really good touch point, just to ensure things are still going well and you know when you need to pivot and adjust if [they] aren't."

While many neurodivergent employees need support in the workplace to do their jobs effectively and productively, that's simply one component. Managers and colleagues must also be aware of their own biases, says Mawji.

"We have our own biases based on how we communicate. If somebody communicates differently, we may have a bias or judgment against that. It's really important to be aware of that, because if you and I communicate differently, it doesn't mean one of us is more correct than the other."

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**Brooke Smith is a freelance writer.**